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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effectiveness of improvements in a Singapore graduate training program for elementary school teachers of English as a Second Language. Program changes focused on providing appropriate, constructive feedback to trainees about their teaching practice and developing trainees' skills of critical reflection. The report describes the program, origins and nature of the changes made in it, details of teaching strategies used, and results of the new approach as reflected in observed practice and trainee comments. The course is structured on a basic unit of a one hour lecture session accompanied by two hours of practice or seminar discussion. The latter portion consists of either demonstration lessons by trainers or student demonstration lessons with video review and critique. The demonstration critique includes feedback on instructional procedures used, language objectives, and teacher-pupil interaction. Another element in the course is a project to develop, with a child, a writing assignment. Trainee evaluations of the course indicate that the techniques used were helpful, promoted confidence in the classroom, and further training in the techniques was desired. (MSE)

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USING FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION AS TOOLS IN BRIDGING THE THEORY-PRACTICE LINK IN LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL

Gayle Whitson and Peter Bodycott

Abstract

The importance of providing pre-service training teachers with a solid understanding of the language theories which influence and affect the teaching of language in the classroom has never really been questioned (Widdowson, 1984). However, finding an appropriate balance between providing theoretical knowledge and practical hands-on experiences has been a continual challenge for the English Primary Methods Team at the National Institute of Education. This paper will examine the "theory and practice" issue at two levels: 1) maintaining the balance within the course programme and 2) the link between the teacher training site and the schools.

The paper will go on to provide a brief description of the Postgraduate Diploma In Education (Primary) English Language training package and highlight the course components which have been incorporated to maximise the use of feedback and reflection. Three types of data, oral, written and video have been collected for analysis. Initial findings reveal differences in postgraduate trainees written and oral feedback concerning the degree of transfer-ability between programme knowledge and school practices. Students also express greater methodological confidence at the lower primary level.

Introduction

A continuing fascination, some may prefer frustration, among teacher educators is the development of tertiary training methods and programmes which facilitate the transference of the knowledge and practices acquired in teacher preparation programmes to the classroom setting.

It is believed that tertiary training programmes should engender within the trainees an understanding of the principles upon which their tertiary courses are based. The trainees, in turn, can then stimulate them naturally into their own

classroom practices. This however is not always the case. Students who pass the various forms of assessment within the course have been heard discussing, and observed practising, methods which in extreme cases run contrary to those presented during the programme of study. Adding insult to injury, while responding positively to written course evaluations, the same trainees when interviewed, following teaching practice, failed to see the link between their preparation course and the real world of the classroom. For example, in response to the following end-of-course evaluation question; "What are the main strengths of the course?" students replied:

Student 1 : The course was interesting and enjoyable especially the hands-on tutorials sessions.

Student 2 : The tutors were very helpful in giving us down-to-earth suggestions. Very adequate resources and readings are provided.

Student 3 : I was surprised by the changes in the teaching of English in the primary schools. I gained many new, up-to-date methods of language teaching from the course.

(PGDE (P) Course Evaluations, 1990)

whilst during post-teaching practice interview sessions the same students responded:

Interviewer: "Did you have a good teaching practice experience?"

Student 3 : "Fantastic, I just love teaching, my supervisor was so supportive. I had a really good teaching practice."

Interviewer: "Did you get to try out the methods and ideas presented in the course?"

Student 3 : "Oh no. The school isn't doing process writing and DRTA and I was in an upper level, so I didn't get to try out SBA or LEA. But I really had a great time teaching."

Student 2 : "No, not really, I did some role play - the children loved it and my supervisor was very impressed. The principal wanted us to use a lot of group work."

Interviewer: "Do you think the ideas and methods presented during the course will be relevant for your future teaching?"

Student 1 : "Well, sort of, the principal really wanted me to stay on in his schools, but he doesn't have any positions - he is trying to get me posted to a school near his which follows a similar approach to the curriculum. Maybe not, but I still thought the course was really interesting and I learned a lot."

(PGDE (P) Interviews, 1990)

The common denominator, in both written and interview data, is that the course content is enjoyable and enlightening. Students perceive the course as innovative and from their readings, feel it provides a comprehensive coverage of the current trends in language teaching. Undergraduate evaluations of similar courses conducted by the same tutors, revealed that 90% of teacher trainees "thought that the course was very useful in their classroom teaching experience" (Chew, Mah, Whitson, & Tan, 1989, p. 21). In fact, the teaching of English methods course received the top rating amongst core curriculum studies courses offered in the teacher training programme (Chew et al. 1989; Mah & Chew, 1988). The course content is directly based upon and supports the Ministry of Education's language syllabus, which advocates a communicative, thematic approach to language teaching with an emphasis on process learning. Yet despite similar theoretical foundations and favourable evaluations, the links between teacher training and practice are yet to be explicitly realised.

These responses typify the majority of postgraduates evaluations and interviews conducted on a language teacher preparation course at the National Institute of Education, Singapore in 1990. As a result the programme of instruction was modified to meet the needs of the students and bridge the gap between teacher training and teaching practice.

Changes in Teacher Training

The improvement of pre-service teacher training courses isn't new. Teacher educators have available to them a wealth of research from which problems in training can be analyzed and approached. In the context of the present study, changes were made from an informed position. Past research was analyzed for practical and cultural relevancy. Papers were identified which dealt specifically with our research problem. "How can we as teacher trainers assist students in

transferring training knowledge and experience to school practice?" Underpinning this problem is the question; "How can we strengthen the theory-practice link?" which is vital in making the transfer a reality.

Theory into Practice

Widdowson (1984) uses the term "idealized" and "non-idealized" when discussing the appropriacy of directly translating language theory research into classroom practice. Idealized refers to the research lab where the researcher has the ability to control and isolate specific variables in order to test learning hypotheses. The classroom is referred to as the non-idealized, fairly unpredictable environment where the teacher must deal with any number of variables (eg. learning styles, different abilities, interruptions, etc.) simultaneously. Therefore, as teacher trainers, any attempt to apply theoretical research findings directly to pedagogical techniques without taking account of the differences which exists in the classroom setting, is seen to be ineffective and professionally highly suspect.

However does the trainee teacher possess the critical reflection skills necessary for analyzing the similarities and differences between the idealized and non-idealized settings? From transcripts it would seem that many trainees tend to compartmentalize their experiences into either teacher training or real-world survival teaching pedagogy. This suggests a priori assumptions about the role of their teacher preparation course, as written evaluations are carried out prior to teaching practice. As postgraduates, these beliefs may also be reflective of their graduate studies programmes. From interviews, following teaching practice, trainees discussed their attempts to replicate wholesale the methods and techniques practised at the institution, in the classroom. Of these the vast majority quickly became discouraged and abandoned their newly acquired theory and practice knowledge in favour of more traditional classroom practices. Although individuals responded differently and the transcripts exemplify the uniqueness of the trainee responses based upon their specific school contexts, they do share at a general level aspects relating to the course and its contents.

Subject-Content Knowledge Base

The beliefs and practices of trainee teachers indicate a great deal about the personalities of the trainees (Cruikshank 1987 Schon, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1987) and their subject matter knowledge base (Shulman, 1987). These two aspects provide the theoretical and pedagogical foundation for changes in course structure

and were seen to provide the link between the training course and the trainees' teaching practice. Shulman's (1987) work, at the secondary level, infers that subject or content knowledge base acts as a comprehensive catalyst from which teachers develop.

Teachers and trainees, at the primary level, it is believed need to establish knowledge in the specific subject or content component they are to teach. In addition, it is believed that they need to be able to recognise that this information can be transmitted in a variety of ways. This will further ensure that the individual pupil's needs are met with appropriate teaching strategies. This knowledge base provides the trainee with greater understanding and control over the material they are teaching, thus facilitating the spontaneous adjustment to the delivery or selection of the methods and techniques to be used. It is essential then, that trainee language teachers' possess knowledge of the function and forms of language and also feel confident about their ability to transform or transmit this content knowledge base to pupils of differing abilities.

A related feature is the ability to reflect critically on issues which arise in the context of the transmission process. A theoretical knowledge base empowers the teacher with a foundation for providing the "why" response or dimension necessary in developing a reflective practitioner (Cruikshank, 1987). In the context of training language teachers, trainees are introduced to a number of major learning and language theories. Through a practical examination of the related theoretical implications, trainees derive their own theories and beliefs about how children best learn language. Through such an approach teachers have a theoretical orientation from which to approach and evaluate the teaching and learning context (Widdowson, 1984).

From a related pedagogical perspective the reflective teacher practitioner model (Cruikshank, 1987; Schon, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1987) greatly influenced the reconceptualization of the course. For the construction of functional understanding, a knowledge base of the approaches used in English language teaching must also be accompanied by reflection on pedagogical practices, or effective delivery within the teaching and learning context.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection encompasses the ability to make informed comparisons between the ideal demonstration of methods, techniques, and strategies as presented in the pre-service methods course, and how those same instructional procedures

may be adapted in an authentic classroom situation. Students need to develop the ability to systematically analyze situations, instructional actions and learners's reaction to gauge effectiveness of practices being implemented. In other words, thinking on one's feet (Schon, 1983). Critical reflection arises out of sound theoretical and pedagogical base; being able to perceive (anticipate) the variables in the teaching and learning context from a multi-dimensional perspective.

Developing the ability to critically reflect encompasses the provision and attainment of appropriate constructive feedback. Feedback provides the trainee teacher with an outsider's perspective of observable teaching behaviour. Feedback can be gathered from the learner's perspective, an experienced teacher's perspective or from an equal novice would-be teacher. Feedback, like evaluation, is without judgement. It doesn't suggest right or wrong. Feedback is continuous, and may occur at any point in the learning process. Constructive feedback consists of observations made in teaching and learning situations. Observable data is brought up for discussion and exploration which strengthens trainee teachers' beliefs and understandings of practice.

The Study

Based upon the student responses and an examination of the pertinent literature, extensive changes were made to the structure of the English language postgraduate teacher preparation programme. At the National Institute of Education, Singapore, curriculum studies in Primary English language teaching are conducted at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This paper focuses upon the programme developments within the twenty-week Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) Primary (P) course and aims at bridging the gap between trainee teacher preparation and actual teaching practice.

Graduate students from Singapore and neighbouring universities apply and are interviewed for placement in the PGDE (P) programme. Their degrees are from diverse fields such as science, economics, business administration and maths. Few come with language or literature backgrounds. Unlike undergraduate degree and diploma programmes PGDE students receive no English academic studies.

Building upon the students' knowledge of the English language and their years as a student, the curriculum studies (CS) programme aims at developing their content knowledge base through demonstration and reflective feedback. The course delivery is structured upon a one hour lecture input session followed by a two hour practical or seminar discussion tutorial. The lecture input allows the content and

theory building component of the course, while the tutorials extend their understanding by providing a stimulated context for teacher demonstrations, student demonstrations, collaborative problem-solving group tasks, and videotaped critiques of actual lessons carried out in primary school classrooms. It is through the tutorial component of the course structure, that the students come to experience the intersection of content, theory-based knowledge, pedagogical practice. Students are seen to be learning through practical experience.

The following tutorial strategies were woven into the existing course structure providing a firm foundation of language theory and practice, which engaged students in the processes of constructive reflection and feedback.

Demonstration Lessons by Tutors

Although trainees bring years of prior classroom experience with them as learners, for many, the approaches and methods used in the teaching of language have changed quite dramatically since they were last in the primary classroom. The lessons and learning experiences our students recall, no longer serve as appropriate models to follow or refer back to. The students' existing schemata is seen to be in need of up-dating and reshaping based upon contemporary understanding of language teaching and learning.

For each language method or teaching strategy discussed in our programme, PGDE (P) students are given a complete lesson demonstration by the tutor. This demonstration lesson serves as a holistic framework which students can discuss specific aspects of the lesson and the underlying theory. For example, the teacher's role, the use of questioning, the lesson objectives, and the procedures followed. The demonstration lesson also provides a multitude of incidental demonstrations concerning management techniques, use of gestures and teacher organisation. In other words, trainees are provided a first-hand learning experience. This learning experience becomes the base point for comparing their own simulated lesson demonstrations.

Student Demonstration Lesson, Video Reteaching and Written Critique

Following the tutor's demonstration, follow-up discussion and analyses, the students in small groups, prepare a simulated lesson using similar resources and procedures. These lessons are presented to the entire tutorial group and followed by similar constructive reflection and feedback examination. It should be noted that

the emphasis is always upon constructive feedback and as such comments are framed in the positive. Based on the feedback provided by the peers and tutor the lesson is then retaught in a microteaching laboratory. This lesson is video taped allowing further reflection and examination. That is, students are required to review the video and to write evaluation of their performance with specific reference to the suggestions given during the feedback session.

This teach-and-reteach strategy assists in refining instructional teaching competencies, and in developing the trainees skills of critical reflection and feedback. The following transcript (Figure 1) is taken from one group's written critique which includes examples of the feedback provided.

Figure 1
Extract LEA Lesson Critique

The lesson was a language learning approach which focused upon the topic of "fruit sculpting". The intended audience a Primary three class.

Specific Language Objectives:

1) Procedural action words (roll, press, cut)
2) Descriptive words relating to shape, size, colour and texture of fruit (smooth, round, spiky, etc)

Lesson Procedures

1. The pupils are to be divided into four groups in which they have to sculpt two fruits.
2. One pupil from each group is to act as a secretary in which they have to take down the steps regarding how the pupils sculpt the two fruits.
3. During the recording the secretary records the action verbs and any descriptive words used.

Feedback on Instructional Procedures

Our tutorial class commented that the secretaries will not be able to experience the fruit sculpting as they had to take down the steps. Furthermore, the secretarial role needs to be carried out by a more competent pupil, and be closely monitored by the teacher. The group suggested the class be trained in taking dictation, and emphasised the links between this and the teaching of spelling. The group pointed out that some pupils may not necessarily talk during the experience.

We were also quizzed about what was to be done with the notes (steps) recorded by the secretaries.

The group praised the opportunities provided for the children to spell out words like "sausage" and "conical". Another positive strategy was the way Li Li (teacher) encouraged the class to listen and respond to their classmates' observations.

Feedback on the Language Objectives

The tutorial class felt that our lesson plan was hanging in the air and didn't fully explore that theme. It was suggested that our lesson plan could be part of a larger thematic unit on "food we eat". The term "fruit" could be a sub-theme. Our objectives could also be broadened by including discourse markers/adverbs like finally, first, then, next, after, and so forth.

The group praised Mazlina (teacher) for taking the opportunity to make use of words like "pinch" "press" "poke" and "roll", preparing the students for the activity ahead and to provide reinforcement to the language objective on action verbs.

Feedback on Teacher-Pupil Interaction

Mazlina was able to bring about much oral language, and that provided the foundation for a meaningful dictation experience although they pointed out that there were too many "OK's" in her speech. They felt the pace set for the reading was appropriate although her pronunciation of "t" (torn) for "thorn" needs some attention.

Guided Video-Viewing Lessons

Videotaped lessons of actual classroom teachers provided trainees with the opportunity to examine lessons from the Singaporean context. These tapes transported the trainees into the local classrooms without leaving the campus. Furthermore, the taped lessons provided the authentic contextual features of class size, physical arrangement of the room, and spontaneous audience responses. Trainees vicariously experienced the multi-dimensional teaching role which the teacher was called upon to play.

In preparation for viewing the authentic videotaped classroom lessons, trainees were given a copy of the teacher's lessons plan. The lesson plans were examined in pairs, discussing the procedural steps in relation to the stated lesson goals and objectives. They were then divided into small groups and each group was given a video-viewing guide sheet and assigned a specific observational task. Observations made during the viewing were discussed in a follow-up feedback session.

Trainees were encouraged to reflect upon the principles and procedures of language learning identifiable in the lesson. Their constructive comments served as a basis for discussion concerning positive teaching practices, and areas where the effectiveness of instruction could be improved. Critical reflection skills were prompted through in-depth discussion of specific areas identified for improvement. This involved brainstorming alternative instructional means and the possible implications.

For example, in a video which involved the "solving the mystery" activity the lesson went well overtime. Trainees discussed where the teacher could have saved time. A number of possible procedural alternatives were discussed. General comments such as "the activity was a good one" were analyzed, reflected upon and developed into more concise statements such as, "the more involved the children are, the richer the language experience. If the activity is allowed to run overtime, then you have less time for oral discussion and text development."

This type of tutorial activity, while building opportunities to use critical reflection and feedback skills, also provided an important induction into the world of teaching. The experience gives training teachers their first glimpse of how the idealised methodology gets translated into practice in the school setting.

Process Writing Assignment

This major course requirement involved the trainees in developing, using a process-oriented approach, one child's selected writing piece. The one-to-one nature of the assignment allows the trainee to put into practice, with a child, the procedures which have been demonstrated, discussed and analyzed. The responsibility for setting up the learning environment and the teaching strategies, is the trainees alone. Through the assignment, the trainee experiences the frustrations and successes of developing an individualised programme based upon the needs of one child. The assignment is viewed as rigorous and challenging by the trainees.

Perfect mastery of instructional competencies is not the focus but rather the development of the trainees' evaluatory and critical reflection skills.

Trainees are required to tape their interactions and conferences with the child. These tapes are, in the course of the assignment, reviewed by the trainee, analyzed and reflected upon. The students' ability to critically analyze their own teaching in relation to the child's needs and theoretical intent becomes then the focus of the final written section of their report.

The following extracts taken from several trainees' reports highlight the critical reflection process and related learning gleaned from this particular experience.

Assignment Extracts

"I used open-ended questions to invite more responses than monosyllabic answers. Some questions yielded answers that could be incorporated in the composition but some were not as informative. In response to the question "What part of the story do you feel could be improved?" my student replied that he was not particularly satisfied with the story outline, though he was quite willing to try it out. This was in contrast to his encouraging responses during prewriting and drafting stages. This indicates the child is reading his latest drafts like a writer and can see shortcoming in his story's development"

(Li Li, 1991)

"Regrettably, my peer revision session did not turn out as well as expected. At times, I prompted him too much, insisting that he reply. It was only at the end of the session, while listening to the tape that I discovered my student had never done process writing before. I must learn to listen more closely, and get to know the student better, before asking him to do things"

(Kitty, 1990)

I managed to tackle the first two areas which directly related to the story content, OK. However, I felt less than confident following-up on the this area relating to leads, although I made mention of it when I shared a book 'Ace Dragon Ltd' by Russell Hoban which had a different introduction than "once upon a time"

(Heng Seow, 1991)

"I learnt that process writing, an interactive task, demands time and perseverance from both the teacher and pupil. The teacher's main job is to impart the skills of writing whilst encouraging the pupil to take more than one examination of his draft. It's rewarding to witness visibly a better piece of writing emerge at the end of the day"

(Teck Koon, 1991)

Discussion

The PGDE (P) course is actually still in its infancy stage. The changes made to the course content and components are by no means finished. The restructuring process must be ongoing, if we are to continue and to try and meet the needs of our training teachers and the demands of the school and educational community. The course remains responsive to the feedback gleamed from the course participants. Teacher trainers it is felt, must be receptive to the feedback cycle (change process) and look for opportunities to implement and monitor changes made to the course content.

The PGDE (P) students are a unique cohort to study in the area of teacher training. As university degree holders, these trainees come with a variety of academic specializations. Many of which have acquired a depth of content knowledge but no exposure or need for practical application. For many of the trainees, this subject knowledge bears little relationship to the primary school curriculum. Their prior educational experience at the university then is quite different from the expectations at the teacher training institution where application, and mastery of pedagogical competencies is their new future.

Whether this prior experience affects their ability to perceive the relevance of theory into practice is an area for future investigation. In 1992 a monitoring strategy will be implemented which will provide a profile of the trainees personal case study history. By profiling we will be better able to understand the relationship of prior knowledge and new learning experiences, as well as to assess individual teacher trainee's development and progress.

Other areas of concern which may have a possible effect on the perceived relevance of the training, arose from analysis of the 1991 interview transcripts and trainer notes. During the interview it was noted that students appeared tense, preoccupied, not interested in discussing (elaborating) the applicability of the course content and future teaching experience. Students when later questioned stated that they were worried about their impending exams and the fact that the

exam schedule immediately followed the teaching practice experience. This didn't allow sufficient time for them to revise for the exams. This concern led to a change in the timing of the post teaching practice interviews. In 1992 interviews will be held during May and June following the trainees' appointment to schools. It is anticipated that this change will allow students the opportunity to settle into and establish their initial teaching routines prior to the interviews.

At this time written evaluation data reveals the following:

1) trainees found the teach/reteach, lesson demonstrations and writing project most helpful. They gained most in the areas of the planning, communication and technical instructional procedures. These course components gave students the opportunity to put theory into practice.

2) trainees expressed more confidence in the methods advocated for the lower primary classroom, such as LEA, MLEA, and SBA. Teacher trainers feel this could be a result of more procedurally directed methods in the lower primary, which use specific teaching resources such as pointers, big books, mahjong sheets.

3) trainees desired more opportunities to experience the teach/reteach microteaching experience.

The above findings, while only partial, are quite encouraging and provide insight for further course development. Specifically, attention needs to focus upon why students appear more confident in lower primary methodology, and, given the time constraints of the course, how trainees can experience the video reteaching and written critique procedure to a greater extent.

What remains to be determined through follow-up interview is how successful the course changes have been in assisting teacher trainees to bridge the gap between the training site experience and the school site. To what extent the students have applied the skills of critical reflection and feedback in their daily school routine, and whether their practice reflects solid theoretical and pedagogical grounding.

Conclusion

Worldwide, concern is being expressed over the quality of education that children receive. Many look to the training and preparation of teachers for answers to a multitude of related questions. Therefore, the desire to improve the quality of training that teacher trainees receive is of international interest.

This paper has described how one team of teacher trainers re-examined the effectiveness of their methods course content in preparing new training teachers for their future responsibilities in the classroom. The paper examined two main course objectives, namely 1) how to increase the transferability of training knowledge to the school site and 2) assisting students to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Three factors appear to be key elements in achieving these course objectives; they are: building the content-theory knowledge base, developing skills in critical reflection, and the ability to use feedback. The paper then described the components targeted at providing trainees with maximum opportunity to use and develop their skills of reflection and feedback. Central to the course and related components was the constant reiteration upon language learning. Trainees were constantly encouraged to examine teaching and teachers' practices for underlying theory, whilst matching this with their own beliefs about language teaching and learning. The interactive nature of the course components, with the emphasis upon functional communication and involvement, provided the teacher trainers with invaluable insights into their trainees developing theory of language learning. From these insights the trainers were better able to reconstruct a preparation course based upon trainees' needs.

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